# Mark Chesnutt

Mark Chesnutt is this generation's embodiment of the honky-tonk mystique, a living, breathing repository of the best of the genre's past and present.

It's not just that he's a walking jukebox, someone whose encyclopedic knowledge of honky-tonk songs, famous and obscure, can leave his peers shaking their heads, or that he's nowhere more at home than amid the smoke and neon. It's the fact that his love for the music is accompanied by a voice that expresses, in it's alternately buoyant and mournful moans and swells, the essence of the joy and pain, the love and heartache, that is the honky-tonk life.

There is much about such voices that is inborn, that never knows study or artifice, but that alone could never deliver the necessary power and subtlety. Mark's timeless vocal quality is the result of half a life spent singing the music, polishing his voice, soaring with it, making it as finely honed an instrument as there is for cataloguing the ups and downs that make honky-tonk such a vital musical force in his native Texas.

The skill and believability behind that voice have combined to make Mark an omnipresent force on country radio. His consistent hit making ability, shown in songs like "Too Cold At Home," "Bubba Shot The Jukebox" and "Almost Goodbye," have established him as a singer with real staying power, fueling three platinum albums and an ever-widening fan base. It's also led to the CMA Horizon Award, a CMA award for Vocal Event of the Year for his part in George Jones' "I Don't Need No Rocking Chair," and incredible support from fans and critics alike.

His latest album, his first for Decca records, What A Way To Live, showcases an artist at the peak of his craft. From the crisp, smooth western swing of the title track through the bluesy "All Of My Heart," shows Mark weaving the many influences he grew up with into his own finely honed sound, and sounding more relaxed, confident and more in control than ever. Moods range from the light-hearted masterpiece "Live A Little," a smooth and laid back look at life, to "She Dreams," the album's first single and a haunting look at the loneliness-driven dreams of a suburban housewife. Through the Cajun touches in "Gonna get A Life," the bouncy and fiddle-driven 'Goin' Through The Big D," and the broken-hearted balladry of "Down in Tennessee," Mark again proves himself to be one of country's most versatile singers. There is also a duet with Waylon Jennings on the Classic "Rainy Day Woman," as well as the powerful "This Side of the Door," and "It's Almost like You're Here," a tender look at rainy night longing. Throughout What A Way To Live, Mark again proves all his skills, from song selection through vocal flair, are in great form.

He grew up in East Texas, where music and dancing matter, where the honky-tonk that celebrates hard living, hot loving, and the sometimes painful aftermath of both is sprinkled with traces of other musical influences. Mark's father sang for years, releasing a couple of singles on an independent Nashville label in the late '60s, and Mark picked it up practically by birthright. With his parents' encouragement, he

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began what has amounted to a lifelong study of the music. He memorized whole albums by his favorite artists and took to the stage in the clubs he visited with his parents. Among the most important things he learned during that period was an attitude that has since served him very well.

He played "any place that would have me," and used his fiery performances and increasingly popular regional releases to draw a big-league following. He also earned the chance to play at George Jones' theme park, "Jones Country", where he opened for Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Jr. and Willie Nelson, and where he began a long, close relationship with the Possum himself.

Jones, of course, was and is more than just the greatest living country singer when it comes to the artists in this part of Texas. His ethereal voice echoes across the landscape, permeating the air as surely as the scents of pine woods, gulf shrimp and oil. In an era when most country singers, from local roadhouses to arena tours, were admirers, pretenders, idolizers, fans or wannabes, the Master himself would call Mark, upon the release of his debut album, "the real deal." His feelings for the talented young singer were such that, when Mark's father died, Jones gave him his number and told him to call him whenever he needed.

The Nashville attention that would lead to Mark's first album began when a few executives heard a copy of "Too Cold At Home," which had been released regionally, and began visiting a Beaumont club called Cutter's, where Mark headed the house band.

"I went to see him on a Wednesday night," said Mark Wright, Chesnutt's producer and Senior VP/Head of A&R at Decca Records," and there were 500 people two-stepping and loving it and loving that wonderful voice coming out of the speakers."

"Too Cold At Home" had "classic" written all over it. The straight forward tale of marital discord was elevated to the level of high drama by Mark's multifaceted baritone. After it's release, Mark's management and booking team were going to follow the normal procedure of waiting for a time before setting up a tour, but demand from talent buyers around the country forced their hand and Mark and his seven-piece band got on board a rickety, second-hand tour bus and headed out. In September, just a month after the release of "Too Cold At Home," he did 15 dates, and the pace picked up even more in October. His album came out months ahead of schedule, and by November he had a new bus.

The critics picked up on him immediately, calling what he did "hard-core traditional music performed with a sharp and vibrant edge," and "the purest, hardest honky-tonk by a touring national artist in a long time." He undertook the most ambitious tour of any of country's newer acts, working with the Judds, Reba McEntire, Alabama and Kenny Rogers. Five singles from the first album became hits and by the time he was ready to record his second, the best writers in the business - Max D. Barnes, Harlan Howard, Dean Dillion, Dennis Linde - were bringing him songs. Mark had arrived.

He has been there ever since. Through albums like Longnecks & Short Stones with hits including "Bubba," "Old Flames Have New Names," and "Ol' Country," and Almost Goodbye, which featured "It Sure Is Monday" and the title cut, he carried young country's best to fans everywhere.

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"I look for a song that every country band playing in bars like I used to is going to play. I want a song that's going to be a classic, something they're going to play forever."

His approach to the business part of the music is relatively straightforward as well. He simply keeps his head down and keeps going, leaving much of the politicking to others. In the process he has become almost a throwback to an era when touring and quality singles, one after the other, built stardom for the long haul.

Like Jones, he finds some of the trappings of stardom a little rarefied for his tastes, but it's not hard to find out what he loves about it.

"The only time I feel like a star," he says. "is when I'm on stage, with all the lights in my eyes and all the people yelling."

His love affair with the music itself has never changed. You can find him, when he's got the time, hanging with old friends, playing old records (Mark collects them) and singing the old songs till all hours of the morning. Or you might find him, in between fishing or hunting expeditions, stopping by the places he used to go.

"I love to go to a bar with a jukebox that has all those old songs." he says. "That's what I learned to sing on--songs like 'She Thinks I Still Care,' 'Swinging Doors,' and 'Tonight The Bottle Let Me down.' To me there's a mystique about them. I'd rather listen to any old crying in your beer George Jones or Merle Haggard song than anything."

As those influences filter through his own remarkable voice, Mark has become the conduit, the medium through which the last generation of honky-tonk is funneled to the current, and it's Mark that a whole new class of Texas singers are looking to for inspiration. Through it all, he sees the cycle that brought the music to him continuing.

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